

Is Inclusive Education feasible in Egypt?

In November 2007, the Egyptian Minister of Education launched the National Strategy for Education Reform, with a chapter about the official plan for including 10% of children with disabilities in regular schools by the year 2012 (approximately 150,000 children). This is in line with the Education for All agreement that Egypt ratified in 2000.

Yet, many professionals at all levels still believe that this is an idea imported from the West, impossible to implement in Egypt and that it would harm both children with and without disabilities. However, 98% of children with disabilities at school age are still waiting to get their right to education, as only about 38,000 children with disabilities (around 2% of the population) have access to special schools. Will implementing this strategy actually benefit children or would it produce more chaos in an already confused educational system?

This article will attempt to look at the feasibility of Inclusive Education in Egypt, presenting lessons learned from its implementation in Egypt to respond to fears and worries that prevent Egypt from following the steps of countries such as India, Mozambique, Nicaragua and other countries with similar limited resources.

One might argue that **children with disabilities** cannot cope with the regular curriculum. However, in the frame work of a project implemented by Seti Center Caritas Egypt and Save the children UK, 355 children with disabilities attended regular classes in the past 4 years in 15 schools and 15 KGs in Cairo, Alexandria and Minia and most of them passed their end of year examination with grades comparable to their peers. Success is ensured by appropriate preparation for teachers and parents, through meetings, training courses, and other supporting activities to equip them with skills enabling them to present information to children with disabilities in an accessible way. Parents Association of children with Visual Impairment (PAVI) also supports inclusion of children with visual disabilities in regular primary, preparatory and secondary schools, training teachers on making the necessary adaptations to make curriculum accessible to children with visual disabilities.



Girl with auditory disability in Inclusive class

After enrolling children in a pre-school program, Nida'a association has successfully included around 40 children with auditory disabilities in elementary schools and Integrated Care Society did the same with another 40 children with cerebral palsy, one of them already in 2nd year of college.

There is also the concern that children with disabilities might be bullied, discriminated against or just left out. However several examples of friendships between children with and without disabilities emerged in schools, and teachers report that when they prepared the class for the newcomer through activities, bullying was

never an issue, on the contrary, there was a trend in the class to facilitate the participation of the child with disability to regular classroom and playground activities and to solve together any problems he might face.. In a primary class in Alexandria, a child devised a lamp that turns on when the bell rings to make his friend with auditory impairment aware of the start and end of the class.

Another concern is about the fact that **children without disabilities** might lag behind as the presence of children with disabilities monopolizes teachers' attention.

However, many teachers in the above mentioned programs report that the general level of achievement in these classes was not less, and in some instances better than the general level in the school. "The average child becomes above average and the weak child becomes average" said one teacher in Minia in a documentary film produced in the framework of Seti and Save the Children Inclusive education project. Children without disabilities have even benefited from the newly introduced methods of active learning and peer tutoring that were first intended to benefit children with disabilities.



Peer tutoring in Inclusive class

But what about **teachers**? Won't they find that the presence of a child with disability is an additional burden in an already crowded and undisciplined classroom? To face this difficulty, the above mentioned programs provided initial teacher training to help teachers deal effectively with individual differences. Consequently, they used visual and multi-sensorial methods, rearranged the classroom seating, and used effective methods of behaviour management thus increasing participation and minimizing behaviour problems. Teachers often report that they are more confident with their teaching skills and confirm that they possess more effective class management techniques, and resort less to physical punishment.



Teacher explaining to child with Down Syndrome

Don't **parents of children without and without disabilities** resent the situation, feeling that their children are left out not getting the attention they would get in a non-inclusive setting or that they can harm each other? Experience gathered from the projects showed that parents from both sides, when their opinion is sought and taken into consideration and when they find that the needs of their children are addressed, are satisfied with the results, and advocate for Inclusive education with authorities and with other parents. Several parents are now active



Board of trustees meeting

members of the schools' Boards of Trustees, and are mobilizing community resources to improve the state of schools, in line with the government aim when establishing these boards.

Is there any **additional cost** tied up to inclusive education that would make it difficult to spread and maintain? No new structures are needed to be installed to cater for Inclusive Education as such. Physical adaptations are minor, and can be integrated in the new plan for increasing school accessibility to which there is a budget allocation. Resource rooms can be furnished with low-cost equipment, and support teachers can be seconded from special schools. Training on dealing with individual differences can be included in regular teacher training plans. In fact it will be more expensive to create new structures, such as new special schools, dealing uniquely with children with disabilities than it is to make use of the existing regular schools, upgrading them and giving them new roles.

Inclusive Education is feasible in the Egyptian context. Experience has demonstrated that with appropriate preparation, regular governmental schools can welcome children with various abilities who would not otherwise have access to education, given the fact that special schools are limited. A National plan already exists and all what it takes is to put it into effect and to make use of the experience of previous implementations to ensure its success. Developing countries in the Middle East, Asia, Africa and Latin America with situations similar to Egypt have already gone further along the road for achieving Education for All goals. Will Egypt still lag behind or will it catch up with this progress?



Children with and without disabilities

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